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2012

# Afghan Languages in a Larger Context of Central and South Asia

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## Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Spooner, B. and Schiffman, H. (2012). Afghan Languages in a Larger Context of Central and South Asia. In H. Schiffman (Ed.), *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice* (pp. 2-12). Leiden, Boston: Brill.

This is a selection from the introduction to *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice*.

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# Afghan Languages in a Larger Context of Central and South Asia

## **Abstract**

The pioneer Western investigator of the languages of Afghanistan, Georg Morgenstierne, who began his work in 1924, called Afghanistan linguistically “one of the most interesting countries on earth.” Linguistic work by local scholars began in the following generation. When one of us [Spooner] first met Dr. A. G. Ravan Farhadi (the author of *Le Persan Parlé en Afghanistan*, 1953) in Kabul in 1972, he announced that in the latest count the number of languages known in Afghanistan had reached 48.

## **Disciplines**

Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics | Anthropology | Political Science | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Comments**

This is a selection from the introduction to *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: The Changing Politics of Language Choice*.

## 1. The history of Afghan language study

The pioneer Western investigator of the languages of Afghanistan, Georg Morgenstierne, who began his work in 1924, called Afghanistan linguistically “one of the most interesting countries on earth.” Linguistic work by local scholars began in the following generation. When one of us [Spooner] first met Dr. A. G. Ravan Farhadi (the author of *Le Persan Parlé en Afghanistan*, 1953) in Kabul in 1972, he announced that in the latest count the number of languages known in Afghanistan had reached 48.

Any study of the languages of Afghanistan must take into account a number of factors relating not only to the geography of the territory itself, and the historical composition of Afghan society today, but also to the way our knowledge of it has developed since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These factors tend not only to color but to distort any efforts to explain what is going on today. Our modern Western study of Afghanistan began with the formal visit of Mountstuart Elphinstone on behalf of the British East India Company to the then Afghan Shah, Shah Shoja, in Peshawar (now Pakistan) in 1809. The British interest had been awakened by rumors of a possible collaboration between Napoleon and the Russian Czar (Alexander I) to invade India from the northwest—the only feasible land entry to the Subcontinent. The British invaded Afghanistan in 1839, via the Bolan Pass and Quetta, and despite significant and heavy reverses in two Afghan wars dominated the government of Afghanistan from then until 1919 formally (though “indirectly,” i.e. without attempting to install any administrative apparatus), and informally until the British withdrawal from South Asia in 1947. During this period of over a hundred years Afghanistan became relatively isolated from the rest of the Islamic world, and barely saw any of the other wider contacts that formally administered territories such as India enjoyed during the colonial period. However, because of the strategic value of the frontier with Russia British agents and travellers compiled a rich library of material concerning the contemporary history and culture of Afghanistan, including the part that became British Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province, and is part of Pakistan. A few scholars from other European countries, especially Germany, contributed to this endeavour.

Although a number of prescriptive grammars of Persian and Pashto appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the systematic study of the languages of the area was launched by Morgenstierne with a series of publications, beginning in 1928, based on his own field research. Both the historical and the linguistic study of the area since these foundations have been conditioned by the efforts of the rulers of Afghanistan from 1880 onwards to build and maintain a viable and cohesive political identity in the face not only of local centrifugal forces, but of first English, then Russian and more recently American interests. The centripetal force of an Afghan (or even, more narrowly, Pashtun) nationalism did not begin to emerge until a century ago, and has never become politically significant for all classes of the society throughout the country. As a result of the British interest in the area up to 1947, the Russian until 1917, the Soviet from 1917 to 1991 and American activities in the region since 1948, and especially since 1979, there is considerable variation among the various approaches of both Western and local scholars<sup>1</sup>.

### Geographical and Historical factors

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular the chapters by Nawid, and by Hakala, this volume.

In the study of the languages in and around Afghanistan we are dealing with language history and process on three scales: local communities; Persianate (or eastern-Islamic) civilization; and colonial, which has now merged into various post-colonial processes under the influence of globalization. The ways in which various factors deriving from each of these three scales of operation continue to interact makes Afghanistan a special case with regard to questions of language use. In what follows we introduce these scales and the way they impinge on each other. Readers without specialist knowledge of the area will find this information important as an introduction to the papers that follow. We hope that specialists will also find the statement useful.

**The Issue of National and Local identities** Behind the languages we are studying lie political identities, modern states, and regional and international encumbrances that owe their current form, if not their existence, to the activities of the British and the Russians, or Soviets, since 1800. But whereas the boundaries and language policies of the other states of Central and South Asia were established entirely by the British and the Russians or Soviets, the emergence of modern Afghanistan, and of its current hierarchy of languages, has a different history. (Only the history of Iran is comparable in this regard, and it is introduced briefly below.) It is a history not well understood, or easily accessible, and the experience of Afghanistan in the recent past has been seriously misunderstood as a result.

Although the city of Ghazni, in the southeast of Afghanistan, had served as the base for a major imperial episode between 975 to 1187 AD, there was no historical precedent for a specifically local state of Afghanistan when the current state was established by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747. The appearance of a new political entity of this type, with an ethnic or tribal identity, was without precedent in the Islamic world. Although the Ottoman Empire emerged from a Turkish tribal base at the end of the thirteenth century, the Ottomans claimed to be leaders not of the Turks but of the Islamic world. Ahmad Shah claimed the title “King of the Afghans.” (We shall return below to the question of why he chose “Afghan” rather than “Pashtun.”) It is important to note also that this was still more than half a century before the arrival of any Western imperialist interests, let alone the influence of Western nationalism. When Elphinstone visited Ahmad Shah’s successor in Peshawar in 1809, the Afghan state had for fifty years been the largest empire in the region, having taken over the eastern territories of the Safavid (Iranian) Empire, and including within its territory not only Kashmir and most of what is now Pakistan, which it took from the Mughal Empire, but also large parts of what are now the Central Asian republics Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Very soon after this date, however, it imploded as a result of internecine strife among dynastic rivals. British power, which became a major factor in the area from 1840 onwards, complicated the situation. But British power needed Afghanistan as a buffer to Russian imperial interests, and was therefore careful to make sure that it did not finally disintegrate.

It appears to have been the British who began to call it Afghanistan, probably in the upper corridors of the administration in Calcutta in the 1830’s. Before this time countries in the Islamic world did not have names. Boundaries were undefined. Areas that were culturally seen as having some sort of natural identity had names, such as Syria (Sham), Transoxiana (Ma vara’u’l-nahr), Sindh or Punjab, but political divisions seldom matched such natural areas. (Iran is an exception. Its origin lies with the Achaemenians. It came into use to identify a high culture before Islam,

under the Sasanians, but it did not take on the narrower meaning of a political entity until the colonial period.) Afghanistan has never been coterminous with any such natural areas. Geographically, it is a quilted patchwork of mountain ranges, valleys and desert plains populated by isolated settlements and fluctuating populations of nomadic pastoralists, which had never experienced any form of cultural, linguistic, or political integration beyond what connected them to the trade routes (especially “the Silk Route”) that passed through the peripheries of the area and connected it to the cities of the larger Islamic world, China and India—to the north and south as well as the east and west. What became Afghanistan in 1747 had been borderland territory between the Safavid Empire in Isfahan to the west, the Mughal Empire in Delhi, and the Uzbek Khanates to the north. Qandahar, the first Afghan capital (1747-1776), had changed hands more than once between the Safavids and the Mughals. Herat, still one of Afghanistan’s four major cities, changed hands between the Safavids and the Uzbeks, and was part of Iran as late as 1863. Before the advent of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the area had since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC formed the eastern marches of the Iranian world (i.e. the world dominated by tribal populations speaking Iranian languages) containing the sites of much important Iranian cultural legend. What became Afghanistan in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been a shatter zone between the major political centers of earlier history and sheltered refugee communities from all sides, including Mongols.

In 1880 the British recruited a surviving collateral member of the Afghan royal family, Abdu’l-Rahman Khan, from his exile north of the Oxus, and placed him on the throne in Kabul. He ruled for 21 years, and with the aid of methods that would have upstaged Draco (and created trouble for the British Indian Government when they reached the ears of Queen Victoria via her relatives in St. Petersburg) created the basis for a unitary nation-state in which all inhabitants, whatever their language, or cultural heritage, were persuaded to think of themselves first not only as Muslim but as Afghan.

In 1893, just over half way through Abdu’l-Rahman’s reign, the British drew the boundary which would divide British India from Afghanistan. It was known as the Durand Line after Sir Mortimer Durand who was commissioned to draw it. The Durand Line ran through the middle of the territories that were then and now inhabited by Pashtuns. Neither Abdu’l-Rahman nor any of his successors ever ratified it, but they acquiesced in its imposition by the British. Since 1947 it has been a source of serious disagreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan

Pashtuns (pronounced Pakhtun in eastern dialects), who in South Asian countries are known as Pathans, were known by others as Afghans—before Abdu’l-Rahman reworked this word as the national identity of all inhabitants of Afghanistan. Afghan is not a Pashto word. It is probably Persian in origin (cf. Morgenstierne 1979:28). This should not surprise us. Other tribal populations in the region are similarly known by blanket terms that may not be native to them, viz. Baluch, Kurd, which are Iranian in form, if not in origin.<sup>2</sup> Over the past millennium Persian has been the language of literacy, either uniquely, or *par excellence*, throughout Central Asia and far beyond, in all directions. The man who created the new empire in 1747 that has now become the nation-state of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Durrani, was Pashtun, as were all his successors (save one short-lived usurper in 1929) down to the recently deceased Muhammad Zaher Shah. But his administration, like the administration of all surrounding states, was conducted in Persian. In 1776 his son and successor, Timur, moved his capital from Qandahar (which shares

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<sup>2</sup> In English, after all, we call the Deutsche Germans, the Hellenoi Greeks, and we used to call the Iranians Persians.

with only one other city, Ghazni, the distinction of being an entirely Pashtun city) out of Pashtun territory to Kabul. Kabul is located in eastern Afghanistan at the foot of a major pass that carries the historical trade route from India to central Asia over the ranges that extend the Hindu Kush into the Paropamisus and Koh-i Baba mountains—the ranges that separate the southern and northern halves of modern Afghanistan. From that date onwards, relations between the Pashtun dynasty that continued to rule and the plurality of Pashtun tribes has been ambivalent. Timur imported a non-Pashtun, Persian-speaking bureaucracy, and both the dynasty and its entourage became similarly Persian speaking.

Pashtun nationalistic sentiments began to influence national policy in the 1930s. Starting around that time a small amount was added to the salaries of civil servants who passed a (not very demanding) examination in Pashto. In the constitution of 1964 Persian was named the ‘official’ language and Pashtu the ‘national language’. The name of the Persian language as used in Afghanistan was changed from Farsi (which means the language of the province of Fars in southwestern Iran, and has been the name in most common use throughout the eastern Islamic world over the past millennium) to Dari (which also has a long history, and means the language of the court). But not very much progress was made in the advancement of Pashto as a language of either speech or literacy outside the Pashtu-speaking tribes of the south and a few of the Pashtun colonies that Abdu’l-Rahman settled in the north. Since 1978, language has been further politicized. All of the languages of Afghanistan continue to be conditioned by the historical influence of Persian administrative and literary usage<sup>3</sup>.

### Larger Perspectives

These historical trajectories illustrate some of the inter-ethnic problems behind the current language situation in Afghanistan and the region, but do nothing to explain the cultural status of Persian (generally known in Persian as *farsi*, but in Afghanistan since the constitution of 1964 as *dari*, and in Tajikistan since 1928 as *tojiki*). For this we must look at a much larger historical picture.

The Persian language became a language of administration under the Achaemenian Empire between 559 and 321, in the form of Old Persian and written in cuneiform (Stolper and Tavernier 2007). It went through a typical process of historical change and development as the language of administration in the succeeding Iranian Empires of the Parthians (247 BC-224 AD) and the Sasanians (224-651 AD), during which time it was known as Middle Persian or Pahlavi and written in a simplified form of the Aramaic script. It was then (in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century) eclipsed for a period of two centuries following the Arab conquest that gradually integrated the region into a new Arab-Islamic empire. When it reemerged, as New Persian, in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, it was written in the Arabic script, but it continued to symbolize the culture (and perhaps the remembered glory) of the pre-Islamic regal courts and administrations, especially their pomp and circumstance. Significantly, Persian reemerged not in what is now modern Iran, but in the cities in and around the northern and western borders of what is now Afghanistan. The implication for the modern non-Pashtun Afghan nationalist is to ask the question: which is the real successor state to the empires of Cyrus and Darius, of Ardashir and Anushirvan? Iran or

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular the chapters by Nawid and by Hakala, this volume.

Afghanistan? The state on the western side of what in western geography we call the Iranian Plateau has not been a strong empire with a great capital city since the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) ruled from Isfahan. The Safavid dynasty was destroyed by an invasion of Afghans! If events had played out only a little differently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the British (both in Iran and in Afghanistan) Afghanistan might now be known as Iran, and Iran might now be known by some other term, perhaps Kurdistan, or Baluchistan<sup>4</sup>, or another name which, like Afghanistan, would be derived from a tribal appellation.

It is important to remember that none of these terms had any ethno-political significance before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—only the memories of past power and glory, and military prowess. The ethno-political significance began to percolate into the area as a result of contact with Europe in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and began to be important in Afghanistan in the 1920s. After the reemergence of Persian as the language of diplomacy, administration, and belles lettres in the courts of the power-centers that emerged in the early Islamic period (whose incumbents were now known as *sultan*) over eleven and a half centuries ago, and for trade between them, literacy became equated with Persian for all functions except those directly related to Islamic law and its interpretation. It did not matter what one's native language was. All interaction that was for the record was either written in Persian, or (if the occasion called for oral interaction) spoken in Persian. This special function of Persian was facilitated by the memory of the authority and protocols of the earlier empires and at its greatest extent was valid in cities from as far west as Sarajevo under the Ottomans to the Takla Makan Basin under the Uzbeks and from the Turkic oases of Central Asia to the Nizams of Hyderabad in southern India. There are even records of wealthy young Venetians being sent to the Levant to study Persian in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Persian was also used along the trade routes deep into central and eastern China under the Yuan dynasty, and has been taught at least intermittently in mosques in central China down to the present.

Persian therefore worked as a koine (i.e. similar in function to Hellenistic Greek a millennium earlier), and was remarkable for its linguistic stability and standardization over a vast area from southeastern Europe to central China—which is obviously related to its high cultural value as the language of literacy among people most of whom did not speak it at home. Afghanistan was in the middle of this area. However, there was of course some change. Handwriting styles changed, and there were changes in preferred literary genres and in rhetorical style. Turkish, which in its Uzbek form had been a language of literacy, in various scripts in Central Asia, before it gave way to Persian, as the Saljuq Turks, the Mongols and later the Uzbeks converted to Islam and became the rulers of major power centers in the eastern Persianate world, finally in the 15<sup>th</sup> century began gradually to replace Persian in the west, albeit in a highly Persianized form, known as Ottoman Turkish, in the Arabic script. The next language to appear in writing was Pashto (again in the Arabic script) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but only for belles lettres. Urdu followed in north India, but had begun earlier in the Deccan. Then Sindhi began to be written, facilitated by the British. In 1837 Urdu was formally adopted by the British, in place of Persian, as the language of interaction between the Government (which from then on conducted its affairs in English) and the local population<sup>5</sup>. Other languages, like Balochi<sup>6</sup> and the Dardic languages were still unwritten when Protestant Christian missionaries arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But even

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<sup>4</sup> See the article by Spooner on Balochi, this volume.

<sup>5</sup> The article by Diamond (this volume) is pertinent here.

<sup>6</sup> Spooner, this volume.

though much has been written and printed in Balochi since the establishment of the Balochi Academy in Quetta in 1961, Baloch in Iran who were fully literate and well educated in Persian claimed they could not read books and newspapers printed in the Balochi. For them, reading meant reading *Persian*. In India Persian continued to be taught not only in traditional madrasas, but in modern schools, with a status comparable to Latin in England. It ceased to be a required subject in India and Pakistan in the early 1960s, about the same time that Latin ceased to be required for entrance into Oxbridge.

There is no evidence that it ever occurred to Ahmad Shah, when he launched the new state in 1747, that his administration should be conducted in the language of his own community, Pashto, even though Pashto had been a language of literacy to at least some degree for at least a century, probably more. When his son and successor Timur moved the capital to Kabul in 1776 he developed his bureaucracy with Persian-writing, Turkish-speaking Qizilbash left behind from Nader Shah's Indian expedition in 1738, even though they were Shia. Both the interest in Pashto literacy and the growth of Pashtun nationalism were hampered by the political fragmentation of the Pashtuns that paradoxically had resulted from the establishment of a Pashtun dynasty. But the idea that Pashto should be used at least on an equal basis with Persian has been building since the 1920's, and it was included in the constitutions of 1933 and 1964. "In 1936 and in the constitution of 1964 it was reaffirmed that Pashto, alongside Dari, should function as an official language" (Miran 1977:1).